



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SELECTION OF READING TEXTS IN AMERICA AS VIEWED FROM ABROAD¹

By ALBERT SCHINZ

THE TITLE of this paper was worded by the Chairman of the program committee. This statement will dispel at once, I am sure, the fear you may have felt that I was to assume the attitude of a critic. I am particularly anxious to say this, since altogether too many things in our Modern Language Departments have been "viewed from abroad" of late, and I would be sorry indeed to incur the reproach of encouraging this tendency; whatever "viewpoint from abroad" comes in, will be of comparison and not of criticism, for the first thing to be remembered in approaching this subject is that American instruction in the twentieth century has not, cannot have, must not have, in many particulars, the features it has in Europe, where traditions, life, aspirations, the whole organization of academic life, differ very much.

It is not a question of passing judgment, from one point of view, it is a question of understanding both points of view; and it is, I suppose, to the fact that I have been brought up in Europe and taught very long in America, that I owe the honor of being asked to speak today. It is by *comparison* that very often we succeed in seeing more clearly; it is *comparing* that I am perhaps in a better position to do than some of us here.

Just one thing more by way of introduction: Even when we understand rightly it is unbecoming to be dogmatic. It is not necessary either. When not mere individuals, but groups of people, nations, classes, are concerned, the goal is reached in human affairs by unconscious groping, rather than by conscious proceedings. It may take a long time—but as the plant turns unconsciously toward the sun, so human society turns unconsciously towards light. The best we can do as individuals is to find out, by careful observation, and try to determine, which

¹ Read before the Modern Language division of the N.E.A. at Milwaukee, July 30, 1919.

various *courants et contre-courants* are accidental and which fundamental. This is not so hard to tell. Then, once conscious of the desirable ones, we can work in order to help these along more intelligently, more deliberately; and we shall then reach the end more rapidly.

Thus my task is not to tell where we *must* go, what we *must* do; if I succeed in telling what rational things we are actually and unconsciously trying to achieve, what we are already in the process of doing, that will be enough.

I

The first—natural—tendency when modern language study was assuming serious proportions in America, was to inquire what school books they read over in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, and to take them over in our courses of French, German, Italian and Spanish. Indeed this natural thing was *not* the right thing to do: for the texts brought in—after the very first stage of the “Reader”—were the classics, Corneille, Racine, Molière, etc., (allow me to use French as illustration). But they were works intended over there to study *literature*, or *artistic language*; and it was possible to use them to advantage in the countries where the children knew the tongue of these authors as their native tongue; they could appreciate such texts. For young Americans who had just started, not only were such beauties not appreciated at that early stage, but, being above the comprehension of the pupils, the latter wasted good energy in vain efforts. The children must know first the plain language; they must not be given meat before they are weaned.

Sooner or later the mistake of teaching literature instead of teaching language, was bound to be realized; and indeed about ten years ago a vigorous campaign was started to drive classics out of our high schools and preparatory schools, and out of first and second year College courses. Dr. Sachs of New York was one of the decided advocates of this sound movement: the insistence of high schools and preparatory schools on teaching classics, he called right out a “bluff.” This campaign has now almost completely succeeded; still there are some who keep the old system, as shown in the report of Mr. Van Horne in the *Modern Language Journal*, January, 1919. Even in some colleges they still read in the

first year, *Atala*, or *Notre Dame de Paris*, *Pêcheur d'Islande*, or *French Lyrics*; or in the second year *Le Misanthrope*, *Andromaque*, or *Cinna*, or *17th Century French Readings*, or *Rousseau*, or *Cinq Mars* or *Le Curé de Tours*.

We must complete the task so well begun, and clean out. This is my first point.¹

We must not be surprised however, if the prejudice is hard to eradicate in certain quarters. Did not a man like Lanson suggest that we ought to pay more attention to literature in our language classes? Have we not repeatedly heard French people who propose series of French classics for our schools, and who come with elaborate plans for marvelous reading so as to make out of American children very rapidly little Thuroldi, or Montaignes, or Descartes, or Racines . . . ?

II

After the phase of beautiful, but naïve idealism, which introduced exquisite wine into paper bags, came another which was a reaction against that. The cry "practical language" was uttered, and . . . alas! joined hands with the movement for natural method, which too often was used for miserable attempts to learn a language *without* method; and the two together gained a great momentum. Not only did teachers take non-classic texts, but among these non-classic texts, they chose what were called idiomatic texts—and idiomatic meant, more frequently than anything else, slang, or argot. They thought that they were echoing the 17th Century cry of Malherbe, for the language *des crocheteurs des halles*, which any way was not the cry against elegant language, but against Latin and Greek pedants. Such texts, e.g., as *La Belle Nivernaise*, stuffed with slang, did more harm than good. . . . And that tendency still prevails. I know of many schools and colleges who took up *Chantecler*, and some have recently taken Barbusse's *Le Feu*, both of which are in many passages, not easy even for French people. That tendency was represented even more in Exercise books—long lists of idiomatic expressions were administered to the pupils, the method conveying the absurd idea

¹ I do not say that isolated fragments of classics are always to be excluded e.g., the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme's* scene of the philosopher teaching phonetics is perfectly legitimate as an extract in a French Reader.

that a language could really be mastered only by the parrot method, and as if the plain words and the sentences composed correctly and according to intelligible rules would not make perfectly good French.

François's 'plancher des vaches,' I am afraid can never be eradicated from the French vocabulary of young Americans—and such abominations are many.²

Here again—here especially—the statistics of Mr. Van Horne are very valuable and encouraging. They show plainly that we are getting cured, and that, as a higher and more earnest class of teachers comes in, the more reasonable view of things obtains. The most popular books read in the last five years, are, all told, also very good from the point of view of language: *Perrichon* and *Colomba*, *L'Abbé Constantin*, stories of Maupassant and Daudet.

The most widely read text of the first year in College is *Perri-chon*, of the second year *Colomba*. This is as it should be—and I feel sure that gradually we shall, by the unconscious process of elimination of less commendable texts, get a very excellent list. Let teachers continue their search, and let such ballots be taken as Mr. Van Horne has done; let the results spread, and we will improve. High school teachers will follow the movement. Our text book firms themselves have already realized the value of the voice from the teacher: they are all anxious to have editions of texts ballotted on in that way. This is moreover, a very democratic way of doing things, and avoids the danger of poor authority—for authority is not always good. In Europe the selection of text books is made by a Minister of Public Instruction, or some higher authority of that sort. That makes for unity. But while in some countries, like France, it has had the best results, (their texts are always admirably chosen and remarkably well edited—for French children), there is no doubt in my mind that in this country the ballot system will have more chance to achieve the right thing. I do not see that, e.g., in the state of New York, where they have The University of the State of New York organized on the same plan as the old University of France, the choice of text books is

² François' *Advanced French Composition* is, except for a few expressions similar to the one mentioned, an excellent book.

superior to what it is in other states. So here again—this is my second point—things are well under way.

III

There is one point, however, where we have hardly started on the good road. Here once more the intentions were very good, but the method is open to discussion. In the same spirit in which schools in an effort to do serious work had turned toward the classics, so they endeavored to do *much* work by reading *many* pages. This—to me— is at present the great stumbling block of modern language teaching. And I am in a position to observe the results rather closely. We get about 250 to 300 students at Smith College each fall, entering with three years of French, and going on with that language. They come from all the States, and they offer, with very few exceptions, the same defect: harrowing inaccuracy in reading and writing. Our efforts must all be directed at first, not towards having the students learn more, but towards having them unlearn mistakes which were not corrected at the beginning, and have become bad habits. And if you turn once more to Mr. Van Horne, you find how, today, this gross confusion of *many* and *much* seems deeply set, and how the amount of work done is measured by the number of pages read or written. The average reading, he tells us, in the first year in College is 300 pages (298); the second year 700 pages (686). Some go over 700 the first year (and remember that they are studying grammar too), and over 1200 the second year. This is incompatible with accuracy in reading, and also (which is almost as serious) incompatible with pleasure in reading. No demonstration is necessary here. We must read less and better; for if we read less and better at the beginning, we can read faster and still better later. This will surely come; it is my third point.

I wish I could say that the remark of Mr. Van Horne, that he has noticed since the war began a tendency to read less, were not accompanied by his explanation—namely, that more time is given to oral conversation work. If this explanation is correct, it means that children read just as carelessly as before; they are reading less only because they give less time to it.

I quite understand that the laboring for weeks on the same story is not desirable, is monotonous to the student. Here I may

be allowed to suggest the method we have adopted at Smith College, (and no doubt elsewhere they have it too) that is to assign, let us say eight pages a day, but one or two of them to be read very accurately. So the student has the satisfaction of reading a good deal, and yet he does not neglect accuracy. Also this idea of stimulating interest by renewing the material read, ought to make us favor shorter text books; short stories as a rule, rather than novels. As to plays, in spite of the general idea that they are good because they have conversational style, they seem to me rather undesirable for this psychological reason: the longest play is written for presentation within two or two and a half hours; therefore if you drag the material over weeks, the effect of somnolence is almost unavoidable. Even *Perrichon* in abbreviated form reads better in class than the complete *Perrichon*.

IV

Little time is left to deal with texts for literature courses. I am not quite sure whether it was the intention of the program committee that I should touch on this point.

Let me only suggest two things: first, we will surely follow the good road if we continue to read first of all the great masterpieces—such as have been recognized by universal consent. Although we are improving here also, how often does it not happen that we find in our classes of literature, students who have read some out-of-the-way poem or novel, or drama, and who have not read the standard works? It is unbearable pedantism to substitute our personal likings to the judgment of the world; we must have individuality, but not at the expense of our beginning students.

It is dangerous, as a rule, to use indiscriminately text books published abroad, and I wish to point out two categories that are bad: as a textbook for the history of literature, Lanson is not to be recommended, at least for beginners; it is intended for students who have read authors and want a guide to appreciate them; but some of us put the book in the hands of students before they have read the authors. The result is the disreputable vagueness of knowledge and thought which men teaching natural sciences reproach us for constantly. Then I see, for example, Pellissier, the 17th, 18th, or 19th century "*par les textes*." This again is a book for France not for us. The author says explicitly that he meant to leave alone

the texts which are easily accessible, and take only such texts by classic writers as are not usually well known, and such by authors of second rank as may be interesting. In other words these texts presuppose that all the standard texts have been read before, but some of us use them with beginners.

The second suggestion is that, unless we can read the book with our students, we do not put it in their hands. I know of editions of *Atala* and of *René* where the passage explaining this story is left out—to spare the child's innocence. In this case let us leave the books alone altogether; they are of no more use than a watch from which you have removed the spring, and we must not have our students consider it quite unobjectionable to read a book without a point. I must say that year after year Racine embarrasses me. His formidable sensualism under his fine language is a problem. I could never read *Phèdre* in class room; even *Andromaque* is no easy task;—if you do not make it plain, it is of no use; if you do explain, it is certainly not of moral advantage to young people in the dangerous age.

By association of ideas—association by contrast—I take this occasion to warn against the opposite evil. Many still think, for example, that literature begins to be real, only when it is objectionable, and that all that is normal and *only* beautiful is goody-goody. The absurdity is obvious, and I will not give a demonstration. But what I may add is that we professors are apt to misjudge our students in their tastes. I had a few weeks ago a remarkable experience. Owing to the absence of an Amherst college professor, I was asked to offer once a week to the Amherst boys a course on the French novel. Many of them had had such a course, but came because I gave mine in French. Now those men (30 in all) had read quite a Frenchy list of French novels, from the medieval *Tristan et Iseult*, to *Madame Bovary*, passing through *le Roman comique* and *Manon Lescaut*. So one week I gave them to read—it came in naturally—*Paul et Virginie*. And I was much surprised to find in the weekly report they handed in that they had liked the story very much; several confessed they had found it the most interesting novel of the course, and some were positively lyric about it; when the final examination came, I still found reminiscences of the effect produced. I am sure others than I will find this a plain illustration of the fact that we must not depend too

much upon our preconceived ideas about students. Our students are sound as a rule. I must however tell the story to the end. A little later I tried the same experiment in an 18th century class at Smith College; the result was, according to appearances, different. I feel sure that many of the sixty girls in that class liked the story, but (this is an aspect of the everlasting Eve) they were ashamed to say so for fear of ridicule; some clearly stated that they did not like it as they found it too "uni" and too "moral." And, by chance, one day during that very week, a book dealer of Northampton asked me to give titles of some good French books for city customers; he said that he had shown the French books of our 19th century course to a college alumna who had declared that these books seemed to have been selected by a Sunday-school teacher. . . . Yet there was George Sand, Musset, Flaubert, and the most triangle-maniacs like Bataille, Bernstein and Hervieu. The truth of the matter was probably that this woman thought it beneath her dignity as a cultivated woman to read plainly good books. However that may be, these very amusing manifestations of feminine psychology are of no consequence, except that they betray a tendency which does exist, and which, for the reputation of American good sense, must be done away with quickly.

Smith College.

P.S.—Some teachers, at the close of the meeting where this paper was read, have asked for suggestions as to texts that might be read with profit, as the speaker had rather dealt with such as ought to be avoided. By way of answer we recall the ten first numbers of the symposium of Mr. Van Horne: *First Year*. Perri-chon, Belle France, Aldrich and Foster, Abbé Constantin, Colomba, Daudet, Maupassant, Français et sa patrie, Madame Thérèse, Tour de France. *Second Year*. Colomba, Misérables, Hernani (for reasons given above we would not recommend this at all), Gendre de M. Poirier, Daudet, (Short stories), Tartarin, Mare au Diable, Maupassant, Roi des Montagnes, Livre de mon Ami. In the third year, some good stiff texts ought to be chosen to show the pupils that, because they can understand easily easy French, they do not know French quite yet—and need preparation before coming to class. Hugo, Balzac, Gautier, Loti are good authors. At Smith we take *Jettatura* which has a remarkable vocabulary, and in the second term we take Victor Hugo's *Poems*

which, besides new difficulties in language, give an opportunity to initiate the student into French Versification, so that the next year they know how to read Corneille, Racine and Molière's verses. Many of these poems are good stories, like *La Conscience*, *Mariage de Roland*, *Aymerillot*, *Cimetière d'Eylau*, *Après la Bataille*, *Pauvres Gens*. Then there are the Napoleonic poems which afford no dull reading either; the poems of the Childhood of Hugo, and the like.